DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 213 139 EA 014 442

AUTHOR Strachan, Jillian L.
TITLE Instructional Supervision and Teacher Development.
INSTITUTION Deakin Univ., Victoria, (Australia). School of Education.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 6p.; Funded by Deakin University Foundation.
AVAILABLE FROM Editor, The Australian Administrator, School of Education, Deakin University, Victoria 3217, AUSTRALIA ($.85).
JOURNAL CIT The Australian Administrator; v2 n2 Apr 1981

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Observation Techniques; Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Development; Foreign Countries; Formative Evaluation; School Supervision; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Improvement; *Teacher Supervision
IDENTIFIERS Australia; *Clinical Supervision

ABSTRACT

Most Australian teachers do not hold traditional methods of supervision in very high regard. A more acceptable form of supervision, clinical supervision, utilizes the information gathered from classroom observations to allow the teacher to gain a wider perspective on his or her own performance under non-threatening conditions. A limited survey, conducted in the Geelong region of the Victorian Education Department in Australia, attempted to determine what teachers understood supervision to mean, what kind of supervision was actually occurring, how teachers felt about supervision, and what teachers would recommend as effective supervisory methods. The study revealed a diversity of opinions about what type of supervision is occurring in schools as well as what should be occurring. There was ambivalence about the use of inclass observation. The survey revealed that systematic classroom observation was not a widespread activity. Another project, Project CLINSUP, used clinical supervision and classroom observations on a deliberate, extended, and intensive basis with teachers. Participants felt that clinical supervision was personally useful and fostered a collegial relationship between supervisor and teacher. Convincing teachers of the utility of classroom observation as a part of clinical supervision would seem to depend on the persuasive powers of other practitioners who have had positive experiences. (Author/JM)

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THE AUSTRALIAN ADMINISTRATOR

A Professional Publication for Educational Administrators

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

Published bi-monthly, February to December

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ED213139

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ISSN 0158-7447

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Vol. 2, No. 2. **APRIL 1981**

A number of earlier issues of The Australian Administrator have touched upon matters of instructional supervision and leadership. In this issue, Ms. Strachan reports on the outcome of a survey which aimed to find out what was happening in schools, and teachers feelings about an alternative form of in-class professional development. The findings provide some useful pointers for all involved in staff development within schools. (Ed.)

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPERVISION AND TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Jillian L. Strachan

INTRODUCTION

Most Australian teachers do not hold the concept and practice of supervision in very high regard. Connotations of inspection by superiors for fiscal gain, tenure or promotion linger on from the past. Such a process of 'summative' evaluation is seen by many to be a traumatic, unfair an unrealistic method of teacher evaluation typical of a bureaucratic organisation. The fact that the intent of many Australian supervision programs is often simply to detect poor teaching, and then attempt to modify it (Pratt, 1979, p.67) can only further contribute to their unpopularity. This latter approach has done little to increase teachers' acceptance of classroom observation.

Because of the problems associated with summative evaluation, growing attention and interest is being shown in the type of evaluation described as 'formative' (Martin & Reed, 1977). In the teaching context, formative evaluation seeks to bring about improvements in classroom teaching performance. One method of instructional supervision concerned solely with teaching method and content, and known as "clinical supervision", has been attracting growing attention since its inception by Goldhammer (1969) and Cogan (1973). In times of public concern for teacher accountability, new curricula, teacher professionalism, declining enrolments, financial cutbacks and teacher stagnation, clinical supervision in particular, and instructional supervision in general may hold considerable potential for maintaining quality instruction in schools.

Clinical supervision programs have been described as a form of professional development intended to bring about instructional improvement through personal interactions between a supervisor and teacher (Goldhammer, 1969; Cogan, 1973; Mackay, 1980; Smyth, 1980). The focus is upon the individual teacher's performance in the classroom. Such programs assume the relationship between supervisor and teacher to be collegial, and are based on the notion that informative, valid and useful data can be collected on teachers' classroom behaviours. These data provide the basis for conferences or discussions between supervisor and teacher and are intended to allow the teacher to gain a wider perspective on his/her own performance under non-threatening conditions. Essential to this approach is the belief that increased awareness of areas of strength and weakness provides the impetus for teacher self-improvement. Throughout the program, the supervisor may also function as a 'resource' person for the teacher by suggesting ways to improve certain aspects of performance, or ideas that might be trialled in the classroom. This type of supervisory program amounts to a form of in-service education that caters for individual differences and focusses on the immediate teaching needs and concerns of the practitioner.

THE AUTHOR

Ms. Strachan, B.Sc., Dip.Ed., G. Dip. Ed. Admin., was a research assistant attached to Project CLINSUP. She is now Science Co-ordinator, Grimwade House, Melbourne Church of England Grammar School and is studying towards her M.A. (Educ) at Deakin University.

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EA 014 442

Although instructional supervision appears to be a viable form of professional development, and possibly an alternative to current forms of teacher in-service education, it is not without its own set of problems, three of which deserve mention here:

1. The resistance of teachers to schemes of supervision, probably due to their memories of 'inspection'. Modern versions of supervision need much publicity, promotion, and re-education among teachers.

2. The question of what supervisors actually do! The role of supervisor and the process of supervision have not yet been clearly defined, at least in Australia.

3. Who are the supervisors in our education system, and who should they be? What qualities should supervisors possess?

Such questions are largely unanswered in the Australian context.

THE STUDY

On the basis of the above a study with four main thrusts, was undertaken by the author (Strachan, 1980).

1. To investigate teachers' understanding of the concept and practice of supervision, when defined as "a formal process used to help to improve the professional development of the teacher in the art of teaching".

2. To explore the situation in selected schools with regard to supervisory practices actually used.

3. To ascertain the feelings and opinions of teachers about supervision.

4. To determine the form which effective supervision programs in schools might take as suggested by practising teachers.

Mail questionnaires were used to survey teachers and principals in schools located in the Geelong region of the Victorian Education Department. Of the total possible population of 320 schools (State primary, secondary and technical, and registered primary and secondary) only 202 were considered suitable for the study. Schools with less than fifty pupils were considered to have too few staff to participate in internal supervisory programs of the type described in the questionnaire. Each school chosen to participate received three copies of the questionnaire, with a request that, where possible, the respondents be: the principal, a junior teacher and a senior teacher (Based on teaching experience).

Of the 202 schools sent questionnaires, 71 schools (35%) returned at least one complete usuable document. The questionnaires returned by individual teachers and principals numbered 173 - a response rate of 27.5%. This low response rate draws attention to the nature of the relationship between educational researchers and school practitioners, and raises interesting questions about school priorities. Nevertheless, some interesting information was gleaned from the responses in the survey.

There was clear evidence that many respondents still regarded the 'new' meaning of supervision as having connotations of judgemental assessment of teachers' abilities. What needs to be emphasised to teachers is the formative nature of instructional supervision, its over-riding concern with improving teachers' performances and the enhancement of their professional development, with a corresponding absence of judgemental aspects.

It further appeared, at least from the responses, that beginning teachers and those with teaching difficulties are relatively well catered for in the area of supervision designed to help them improve their teaching performance. The nature of the supervision for more experienced teachers, however, appeared to be less classroom-centred. Most of their professional development did not appear to be associated with any immediate classroom-related concerns. This gives rise to several questions: Do experienced teachers in fact have needs relating to classroom performance? If so, are they able to make others aware of them? Are experienced teachers embarrassed to admit classroom needs and concerns? Are they unaware of methods which can adequately meet their needs? Do we in fact regard the terms 'experience' and 'competence' as synonymous?

The suspicion of teachers generally, towards observers in their classrooms was confirmed by the survey. It was also evident that the use of classroom observation techniques was not widespread among these same teachers. Until teachers have actually experienced the benefits associated with data-collecting, and the value of non-judgemental observers in their classrooms, their views on classroom observation are unlikely to undergo any meaningful change.

Many teachers showed an alleged preference for self-evaluation of their teaching performance, although they did not elaborate. In the context of the survey and its findings, the term 'self-evaluation' remains ill-defined and is open to a wide variety of interpretations. There is the lingering suspicion, however, that what masquerades as self-evaluation may not amount to much in practice. There are clearly limits to how far individual introspection, on its own, can inform and improve teaching. Further research is necessary to gain information on what teachers mean by self-evaluation, and the methods by which they carry it out in practice.

With regard to the role of supervisor, a large proportion of principals, compared with a markedly smaller proportion of junior teachers, felt that they had the skills necessary to act as supervisors. It seems that many teachers consider experience and expertise to be necessary twin attributes of a supervisor. What this view does fail to recognise is that some modern forms of instructional supervision assume the acquisition of particular skills in classroom observation, data collection, analysis, and interpersonal relations which are not necessarily linked with experience or exprtise in the art of teaching. Research into peer-supervision schemes tends to indicate that teachers with similar or less experience than their colleagues are able to act as effective supervisors for their peers (Alfonso, 1977; McGee & Eaker, 1977).

The major point emerging from the study in the Geelong region was the disparity between what teachers currently experience in schools (in-service conferences, seminars, and workshops) and what they say they would prefer to do (observation of teaching performances, discussion and follow-up). The question of why this difference exists is a curious paradox. How can teachers who are suspicious of classroom observation desire supervision methods which involve this very technique? One interpretation is that teachers can afford to respond idealistically to the question of what is desirable, secure in the knowledge that there is little likelihood of it becoming reality. However, it could be that teachers' views are beginning to 'soften', and that there may be a willingness to see observation for formative evaluation as quite distinct and separate from observation for summative evaluation.

The present attitudes of teachers towards classroom observation present a perplexing problem to researchers and staff developers. How can the opposing views be reconciled? It seems that some attempt to persuade teachers to experiment with data-collection by using classroom observers to provide feedback should be made in an endeavour to resolve the dilemma. However, the very nature of the persuasion techniques themselves, are problematic. Since it seems somewhat hypocritical to use in-service conferences and seminars for the dissemination of information about in-class supervision, especially by university researchers, a more plausible approach might be to inform teachers of the personal experiences of those teachers who have actually engaged in instructional supervision programs. Project CLINSUP, funded by Deakin University, is a research project which does just that! Working with clinical supervision techniques with teachers in schools in the Colac Inspectorate of Victoria, the Project has been operating for twelve months and has just published the first of its Research Reports and two Occasional Papers. It has also produced, using actual classroom settings, a videotape of the five phases in the clinical supervision cycle, and has collected data in various forms about the operation of the programs.

Emerging from the research project are several factors which provide evidence, support and encouragement for the practice of clinical supervision in Australian schools. The teacher participants felt that clinical supervision was a personally useful and practical form of professional development since it focussed on their own immediate classroom concerns. All participants reported favourably on the collegial relationship developed between teacher and supervisor. They were especially impressed with the short 'feedback loop' which was central to the clinical supervision model. The structural framework of this form of instructional supervision has proved workable, flexible, comfortable and beneficial for the participants.

At this stage of the Project it has become evident that two points need to be emphasised to those not well acquainted with clinical supervision. Firstly, clinical supervision is not simply a scheme designed to help teachers who are experiencing difficulties in the classroom. Although it is likely that such teachers will derive benefit from clinical supervision programs, evidence from the Project suggests that experienced and competent teachers stand to gain too. Secondly, it appears that clinical supervision programs may provide the opportunity for principals to reassert themselves as educational leaders in schools by acting as clinical supervisors.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The openings for research and development activities relating to instructional supervision programs in Australian schools are many and varied. Taken at face value, what the results of the survey described above suggest, is that some form of instructional supervision is employed in the many schools. What remains unclear is the rigour and frequency of these reported supervisory encounters and, more importantly, their effectiveness and the impact they have on the classroom performance of teachers. Studies of a more intense observational nature need to be undertaken in this regard. In addition, it seems necessary to look at the possibilities of clinical supervision programs in a wider variety of Australian schools. To date the research has been confined to the primary school level, but there is no reason to suggest why clinical supervision should not have applicability at the secondary, and even tertiary, level in Australian education systems. Whatever the level at which clinical supervision programs are undertaken, research is required into some of the assertions central to the design of clinical supervision. For example, the questions of whether clinical supervision leads teachers to be self-analytical, and whether analytical discussions with supervisors help teachers to improve as a consequence (Sullivan, 1980, p.40), are not at all clear. The actual impact of clinical supervision, in contrast to other forms of instructional supervision and professional development, on pupil learning and achievement, is another area for investigation. Such investigations would entail detailed case studies in classrooms.

In light of the present bureaucratic nature of teacher and administrator roles in Australian education systems, further research into the concept, practice and possibilities of peer-supervision, especially via clinical supervision programs, could prove illuminating. In the present climate of suspicion towards all forms of supervision, it could be that peer-supervision might provide an acceptable form of instructional supervision which is less intimidating than most others.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of a limited survey, there appears to be a diversity of opinions among teachers on what currently happens in schools under the rubric of instructional supervision, as well as what could and should happen. There was a pronounced ambivalence among respondents on the use of in-class observation of teaching as a source of non-judgemental data to inform and improve teaching practice. Systematic classroom observation designed to provide feedback to teachers on their own teaching, was not a widespread activity. Teachers appeared to favour the idea "in principle", but as long as the actuality was someone else's classroom!

In an Australian study that actually used clinical supervision on a quite deliberate, extended and intensive basis, both teachers and supervisors reported positive feelings towards this as a form of professional development "on-the-job". Convincing teachers of the utility of classroom observation and the potential for improving teaching, would seem to reside largely with the persuasive powers of other practitioners who have had positive experiences. Probably what we need more than anything else at the moment, is research in Australian classrooms designed to test out the efficacy of this approach.

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Project CLINSUP is a joint venture by the School of Education, Deakin University and schools in the Colac inspectorate. For further information about Project CLINSUP, contact Dr. W.J. Smyth, School of Education, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia, 3217.

With a view to extending the network of sympathetic colleagues, the editor would be pleased to receive indications in writing from anyone interested in trialling clinical supervision in a school situation.

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